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ABSTRACT

The E.J. Brown School is a collaborative educational undertaking between Wright State University's College of Education and Human Services and the Dayton public schools. The project's purpose is the development of a living learning laboratory based upon shared decision making and collaborative planning for urban children. Students and teachers are volunteers, and the student population of prekindergarten through third grade is representative of the general school district population. Conclusions about program effectiveness with a focus on public relations after 1 year of implementation are briefly discussed in this paper. Recommendations are offered for the enhancement or development of the following areas of concern: connectedness and collaboration; site-based leadership; utilization of functional models; resource allocation; teacher involvement; and administrative commitment. (LMI)

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PUBLIC RELATIONS AND SCHOOL RENEWAL

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E. J. BROWN COLLABORATIVE PROJECT

Dayton Public Schools and Wright State University

The E.J. Brown School is a collaborative educational undertaking between Wright State University's College of Education and Human Services and the Dayton Public Schools. The purpose of the E.J. Brown School project is to develop a living learning laboratory based upon shared decision making and collaborative program planning for urban children.

The school is composed of a cross-section of students who fairly represent the general population of the Dayton Public Schools. The E. J. Brown School is a magnet school in that students selected to attend are volunteers. The teachers who staff the school also are volunteers who expressed a desire to teach in a learning setting where there is cooperative planning of educational programs and where the school is operated on a shared decision making model.

The Dayton Public Schools and the College of Education and Human Services of Wright State University entered into this collaborative educational project November 17, 1987. The school opened September, 1988, with students in pre-kindergarten through third grade. An additional grade will be added to the school each year until the school is pre-K through sixth grade. The school's enrollment will continue to be balanced by race, sex, socioeconomic background, and intellectual abilities.

Eighteen committees composed of teachers and administrators from the Dayton Public School District, faculty and staff of the E. J. Brown School, professors from Wright State University, and citizens from the Dayton community are working on various elements of this collaborative project. These committees provide the project a wide range of expertise from throughout the educational community. The committees meet on a regular basis at the E. J. Brown facility and are actively involved in all aspects of the project.

Dayton Public Schools and Wright State University have made significant commitments to this collaborative effort. Wright State University has made the E. J. Brown project a significant component of the University's Strategic Plan. To this end the University has employed an Executive Program Development Officer whose primary duties are the coordination of the University's involvement with the school.

Dayton School officials have provided the E. J. Brown Elementary School building fully staffed and equipped for this collaborative undertaking. In addition to 36 classrooms, this school has a gymnasium, library, auditorium, cafeteria, shop, and home economics areas. There are several computer laboratories for reading, math, and science instruction. The College of Education and Human Services of Wright State University has committed staff and resources to the E. J. Brown School for all aspects of the instructional program.

The collaborative nature of this effort provides several benefits. First, the classroom teachers at the E. J. Brown School have available University and community experts that they can call upon to assist them in the delivery of the educational programs developed. Second, the University personnel, particularly those in the teacher preparation areas, have a ready resource of classroom teachers for assistance in preservice teacher preparation. Third, the community, represented by the various citizen groups and industrial sectors, is afforded opportunity to assist in identifying educational expectations appropriate to the school. Fourth, E. J. Brown provides a laboratory for development of educational strategies that, once evaluated, can be replicated in other urban settings.

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND SCHOOL RENEWAL

The following conclusions were drawn as a result of one year of work in designing and implementing the E. J. Brown School project:

1. CONNECTEDNESS: School improvement occurs through systematic school renewal efforts. If these efforts and accomplishments are to be accepted within the community by the several publics interested in schools, then these initiatives need to be connected to existing and emerging public relations efforts. Lack of attention to this reality leads to potential attacks on school initiatives by various individuals, groups, and media.

2. COLLABORATION: The probability of a school district initiating and sustaining any significant school renewal accomplishments without the dedicated partnership of an appropriate university is unlikely. However, school districts (and sometimes even universities) view a collaborative relationship essentially as a vendor-vendee relationship. This attitude and perspective is counter productive to good relations or renewal.

3. MEDIA RELATIONS: Good relations need to be cultivated by direct efforts to communicate openly, honestly, and completely with the press and other media. A result of good media relations is that when potential problems arise, the press will inquire first and frequently give the school/university project the benefit of the doubt.

4. COMMUNITY RELATIONS: School renewal implies changes in school programs and operations such as moving from a self-contained classroom to a learning community structure. Renewal will not necessarily be perceived as positive by various segments of the community, including parents. Numerous strategies need to be devised and implemented which, as a minimum inform them about changes, but preferably involve them in some direct way.

5. SITE BASED LEADERSHIP: Irrespective of the nature and scope of the renewal effort, the required leadership must be physically present in the environment undergoing development. Responsibility must be fixed on an individual on site. Long distance leadership is ineffectual. The decentralization of decision-making at the site level and within the site

are critical elements. This leader must be the key public relations contact in communicating publically about school renewal efforts.

6. MODEL AS MECHANISM: A specific model must be developed or adopted. It must lend itself to simple articulation and be predicated on widely recognized principles and research. The model must be functional in that it gives clear direction in terms of expectations and outcomes. It must be relatable at various levels of sophistication to various constituent groups. The model must be comprehensible as both a model and a mechanism.

7. RESOURCES: It costs more money and takes more people to engage in significant renewal endeavors. Reallocation makes some difference, but without a commitment to additional resources, extensive efforts cannot be sustained. More for less is essentially a myth.

8. ASSOCIATION/UNION INVOLVEMENT: School renewal initiatives must involve effective public relations initiatives to communicate the reality of teacher empowerment as essential to site based management and the increased professionalization of teaching. School renewal efforts cannot be controlled from downtown with renewal expected to occur as a result of edict.

9. FACULTY/ADMINISTRATION COMMITMENT: School renewal is dependent upon an individual site developing a plan and being given support to implement that plan. Accomplishment is contingent upon both a faculty and administration committing to the process of renewal and receiving district support to move forward. Commitment toward the following is required: professionalization, school empowerment, streamlining middle management, decentralizing decision-making, and extensive planning.

10. EDUCATIVE FUNCTION OF SCHOOLS: If school renewal efforts are to be related effectively to the appropriate publics, schools need to focus more attention on educating these publics about the nature of schooling renewal initiatives. Effective school renewal initiatives are inextricably related to good public relations. Neither can function effectively without the other.